A Single Decision (Take Two)

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Aboard Invisible Hand, on that fateful day above Coruscant, Grievous makes a choice that causes a few little changes for the Separatists and Republic alike. [rewrite of a much older story]

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Author's pre-note: get the snacks and drinks, this is a long one.

Chapter 30

"I could be working on the ship right now," Voyan muttered, from *Whirlwind*'s passenger seats. For the past few days, he'd been away from his work on *Encounter* as he familiarized himself with *Whirlwind*'s systems and technology while babysitting Grievous's technicians, who had gone over every centimeter of the relatively little starship with a fine comb. And just when Voyan was able to get back to his beloved schedule, they'd received an invitation from their *favorite* super tactical droid.

"Khan specifically requested us," said Esera. "I feel better knowing what he's up to than not, even if he is... Khan."

"It's a fascinating project," Voyan said, "but that droid nearly got us killed once. I'm not forgetting that."

"Your ability to hold grudges is second only to Grievous, lieutenant."

"A bantha never forgets."

Voyan's animal-related phrases were usually lost on Esera, thank to her urbanite upbringing on Coruscant. They soon arrived aboard Khan's nameless supply ship, where his secret project was developing. Esera had heard he'd been involved in Grievous's fight with Quinlan Vos, and received heavy damage during it. *I wonder how different he'll look? Or will he be exactly the same?*

The Khan that greeted them was definitely different. The beak on his face was gone, replaced by a grate-like vocoder. The middle eye was gone too, Khan had reinforced the armor on his head, as well as the rest of his body. Where before he was a droid of blocky shapes, he'd now overhauled himself with sharper angles and curved plates. The clunky pragmatism of his standard tactical droid design had vanished, replaced by something almost elegant and far more imposing. Esera could believe that *this* was the droid who'd dealt Quinlan Vos his penultimate blow. His two remaining red eyes glowed within the dark mass of machine.

"I see you've updated your wardrobe," said Esera.

"In a manner of speaking." Khan's voice was different. It was still deep, with mechanical overtones, but there was a more organic variety of intonation to his words. The new vocoder was not standard issue. Khan filled them in on his encounter with Vos, and then the upgrades he'd given himself since.

"If you have a cape, you'd look like an ancient Sith knight," Voyan said. Esera cringed, conflating the Jedi knights and Sith lords was a terrible mistake.

"A fine idea, lieutenant," said Khan. "I will consider that."

"I didn't say that was a good thing..."

They reached the lab, which had grown even more cluttered than last they'd seen it. There were now four tanks in the room, as opposed to one. And this time, that formerly lone tank was not polarized. Esera saw not a nightmarish metal skeleton half-covered in dark, artificial muscle, but the dormant body of a young woman. A naked young woman, with an umbilical of tubes and wires still connected to her abdomen. She was lithe and sleek, her skin matched the paleness of the two real starship-dwelling Humans in the room, her face was eerily perfect in its beauty, and she was utterly devoid of any hair but for the lashes on her closed eyelids.

"She's come a long way," Voyan said. His eyes darted up and down the artificial woman. Esera had expected feelings indicating lewd thoughts, but Voyan was just impressed with Khan's technical achievement.

"Are you satisfied with the face?" asked Khan. "I struggled greatly with it."

"I think she's good-looking," said Esera, unsure by what metric female attractiveness was judged.

"She's stunning," Voyan said. "She'll get male attention alright, and some female too. I think some people will be a little intimidated, though. That level of physical perfection can be overwhelming. Like a goddess stepped out of her garden and into the mortal world... But maybe I'm just getting unnerved by the lack of eyebrows."

"I have yet to decide hair color," Khan said. "Your statement troubles me, lieutenant. I do not want her to be intimidating. I want her to be approachable."

"Yeah, in retrospect, I should have been more clear on this matter. There is such a thing as *too* beautiful. A girl with a face and body like that would never be found in a spaceport unless she was boarding her private star yacht. She'd have talent agents hounding her every step, trying to get her into acting or modeling or singing. She'd have businessmen, bankers, athletes, holodrama stars, and kingpins all chasing after her. Someone like her wouldn't have to try to be successful. Why would she be associating with us shabby plebeians?" Voyan put a hand on his chin, and stared at the sleeping machine-woman.

Khan looked to Esera. "Should she look more like Captain Komara, then?"

"*What?*" asked Esera.

"According to my analysis, you are far less aesthetically desirable than my creation," Khan said. "You have ill-defined cheekbones, a weak jawline, a small stature, and your distribution of subcutaneous fat would be considered less than optimal by the standards of-"

"Enough, Khan!" Esera snapped, her temper flaring as her cheeks burned hot, but Khan carried on.

"You are not alone in your less than optimal appearance. Lieutenant Voyan lacks the height and broad shoulders Human females tend to find desirable, his facial features such as heavy eyebrows, sunken eyes, and tightly-drawn mouth inspire feelings of distrust and revulsion-"

"Shut up, will you?" Esera was just about to start throwing laboratory items at the droid. She glanced at Voyan, who was keeping a neutral expression.

"Captain Komara and I aren't the peak of physical attractiveness, yeah, most people aren't," said Voyan. He was taking Khan's insults far better than Esera had, internally and externally. "Half the population is below average in any given category. I think you may want to incorporate some of our flaws into the next model." Voyan nodded at the other polarized tanks in the lab. "Don't go too far, though. You want a pretty woman for information-gathering work. Not an outstandingly and unforgettably beautiful one. She should feel... attainable, to normal working people. Do you get what I mean?"

"Acknowledged," said Khan.

"So," Voyan gestured at the woman in the tank. "I'm thinking red hair, how about you?"

"Red in the Human definition, or the actual color defined as red?"

"Why not the *red* red? No matter what color of hair she has, she's going to stand out already. Go all out. I'm sure there's a use for someone like that."

"Captain Komara, what do you think?" asked Khan.

"I think you should let *her* decide," Esera said, crossing her arms and scowling at the two of them.

"That'd work too, Captain," said Voyan, with a shrug.

"She will choose her appearance from here on out, then," Khan stated. "Thank you for your consultations, Captain, Lieutenant."

On the way back to their own ship, Voyan turned to give Esera a questioning look. "Do you really think this will end well?" he asked.

"Mysterious are the ways of the Force," Esera said.

"What does that mean?"

"It's a Jedi way of saying: I have no damn idea."

Aboard *Encounter* once more, Esera started packing for a trip she didn't feel ready for, but had the perfect opportunity to take. She gave her two crewmen a farewell in the hangar. "You boys take care of my ship, alright?"

"Will do, Captain," said Voyan, giving her a casual salute.

"Where are you going?" asked Murshida.

"I'm going home, Mister Murshida," said Esera. "I've got family on Stalimur, they deserve to know I'm alive."

The planet of Entralla had been a burgeoning trade hub before the war, located between Muunilinst and Yaga Minor, themselves trade powerhouses in their own rights. What Entralla had that they didn't, though, was a direct hyperlane into Wild Space, making it the last stop before one entered the Kadok Regions. Most people had never heard of that part of Wild Space, Shaak Ti included. But it turned out that everyone knew a certain individual who hailed from that part of the galaxy: General Grievous, the Kaleesh cyborg and notorious Jedi hunter. *And somehow, I'm one of the few who's survived him twice...* No one let her forget that.

For the reason of Grievous's origin alone, it had drawn the attention of the Republic as it pushed into the Outer Rim in the third year of the war. A small army had been dispatched to subjugate Kalee, in the hopes to lure out wicked cyborg. He never even came close to his home in the time since the invasion, but that army had found far more than it bargained for on Kalee. Contact was sporadic at best, owing to the very remote nature of the system. That was why Shaak Ti had to go in person. The closer she got, the less she liked what she heard about the situation. She was cautious enough to hire two women she never thought she'd meet again, who'd just so happened to be in the region.

"General Ti, the... individuals you requested are here," a clone trooper told her, at the Nexus City starport.

Before the trooper could say more, two very familiar faces appeared around a corner. "Master Ti," said Ahsoka Tano, doing her best to hide a youthful excitement behind a mask of calm maturity.

"It's been a while, Ahsoka," said Shaak Ti, with a warm smile. Behind Ahsoka was the notorious Asajj Ventress, arms crossed and frowning.

"Just when I thought I was out, they pull me back in," sighed Ventress. "I had a security job on Zeltros lined up, you know."

"Oh, relax," Ahsoka said, waving her hand at the former Sith assassin. "Zeltros will still be there when we're done here. Entralla's not that bad!"

Shaak Ti gave the trooper a nod, dismissing him. "We're not staying on Entralla, ladies," she said.

"Oh?" Ventress's interest was piqued, while Ahsoka looked confused.

"Why not? Your call didn't say anything about going further than this place... There's not much around here except Muun colonies and Wild Space..." She narrowed her eyes. "We're going to Wild Space, aren't we?"

"You've become so astute, Ahsoka," Shaak Ti said, keeping up her smile.

"So, where are we headed?" Ventress asked. "If I can't get some rest and recreation on Zeltros, I at least want to have some fun."

"We're going to Kalee," said Shaak Ti. "Perhaps better known as General Grievous's home world."

"Your definition of fun is interesting," muttered Ventress, while Ahsoka just looked resigned.

"It always comes back to Major Malevolent, doesn't it?"

"We've come by some very interesting intelligence lately, courtesy of the General himself," Shaak Ti told them, making sure no one else was in ear shot. "Master Yoda met him on Kashyyyk, where he exchanged information for a duel."

"Yoda fought Grievous?" Ventress leaned forward, mirth in her eyes. "Oh, I would have loved to see that!"

"The fight wasn't important, they both survived. What matters is that what we learned from Grievous matches almost nothing about what we thought we knew about him, while confirming what Dooku told Obi-wan all those years ago on Geonosis." The fact that Grievous believed that elusive Sith lord to be dead was something the Council was keeping to itself, though. "The Council has assigned me to investigate Grievous's past on Kalee, while they chase the leads on the Sith we've gained."

"Alright, Kalee it is," Ahsoka said. "It's probably going to be a hellhole, isn't it?"

"It produced Grievous, it can't be nice," said Ventress. "But nice and me never really got along."

And so the three women departed Entralla for the edge of the known galaxy, heading towards the mysterious home of the Republic's most dangerous enemy. *Obi-wan survived Grievous seven times, didn't he? He's one of our most skilled Jedi, perfectly suited to countering Grievous. Ahsoka fought him twice and barely got away, if not for distractions and outside help. I never escaped him, or fought him to a draw, though. He chose not to kill me. Why?* Shaak Ti had been thinking that question for months, now. Perhaps Grievous thought it was more humiliating to keep her alive. That was the easiest answer, the answer the Jedi publicly accepted. But she knew the others wondered just as much as she did. Maybe that was why they'd given her this mission to Kalee. Maybe the Council wanted her to discover the reason for herself out here. *Or maybe they just want me out of the way, for a while. I failed to protect the Chancellor, and now he's dead. Few other Jedi have failed like that.*

Shaak Ti tried to mediate, but the Force was muddled and murky, as it always was these days. She found no answers there.

Whirlwind's flight to Stalimur only took a few hours. For lack of anything else to do, Esera attended to her lightsaber, giving it a cleaning it didn't actually need. She looked at the leaf-work she'd carved along the hilt, under the guidance of her master at first, and then on her own. Her master said that art was a wonderful outlet for stress and anxiety, things Esera was no stranger to now. *Maybe I should add more, it's been so long...* But then her right hand twitched as a damaged nerve misfired, and the notion left her mind. She was too changed to add any more artistry to her lightsaber. Without realizing it, she'd left that part of her life behind, forever. That epiphany shadowed her spirits like a dark cloud. *Not a good way to start my leave time,* Esera thought. *I'm going to see my brother and sister again, shouldn't that be exciting? Why am I feeling so gloomy?*

Reflection time ended when *Whirlwind* left hyperspace. Immediately, her high-powered sensors detected incoming ships from the system's asteroid belt, the notorious local pirates who had since been drafted into the regional military apparatus. Esera didn't even wait for them to hail her, she sent her credentials out and they immediately pulled off. Her landing clearance came minutes later, and she took *Whirlwind* down to the surface, to the spaceport on the edge of the planetary capital, Veldevale. After a few minutes to put on her best appearance and make sure she had everything she needed in her bag, it was time to begin her quest.

Home, thought Esera, stepping off *Whirlwind*'s ramp and onto the duracrete landing pad. Veldevale was on the equator, but high up on a plateau between two huge mountain ranges, where the air was noticeably thinner. It was a horrifically cold and windy day, the space elevator stretched into the sky, the great tapering bulk of the tether vanishing into the deep blue expanse above. *I know this sight,* thought Esera, looking at the elevator. Some of her earliest memories were looking up at that needle soaring into the heavens. The space elevator was old; older than old, she'd read. The ancient Tionese had built it in an age when just getting into orbit was a dangerous and expensive undertaking. Esera wondered what it had been like, to put oneself in a carbonite chamber aboard a ship with no artificial gravity, driven by a mere fusion reactor, and shot into the unknown by a dimensional drive so primitive that it had taken centuries to reach the Tion Cluster. The colonists who flew off the edge of the map to make new lives had been brave, brave people. Esera hoped she could be as brave as them, as she deliberately avoided the starport train station and walked to the next one down the line, just to get a feel for the city.

Veldevale was a city within a city. Before repulsorlift speeders, people had ridden in wheeled machines, like barbarians. They'd built Veldevale with wide, long streets, in an orderly web-like pattern radiating out from the elevator tether. But once repulsorlifts had opened up the sky for transit, those great open spaces had been filled in, reducing the streets to a more Human scale. One could still see the ancient roads of the planned city, but they were overlaid by the chaotic jumble of thousands of years of haphazard expansion. Everything had been built from local stone, but Esera could see where one phase of building had ended and another begun, as the stones came from different quarries. Some where stark grey, others were a rosy pink, and yet more were a sandy brown. All shared sharply peaked roofs in anticipation of snowfall, though.

The people were eerily familiar to Esera, and she soon realized why: everyone looked vaguely like her. Away from the starport, Esera had yet to see any Human without black hair. Most people had blue or green eyes, with a few hazel or brown eyes here and there. Their faces were all a little like hers, small but pointy noses and unpronounced cheekbones. And they were all short. Wherever she went, Esera was the tallest woman in the crowd; she was even a taller than a handful of the men. *This is new,* thought Esera, trying not to grin. For the first time in her life, she was looking over the heads of other Humans. *This place might not be so bad...*

That relative height got her attention from everyone else, though. The men, all dressed in long coats and wearing caps, openly stared at her, with both curiosity and less innocent intent. The women, every single one in dresses or skirts that went all the way to the ground, at least looked away when Esera turned to them. Some had long hair, others had hair as short as Esera's. Only the young ones had short hair, little girls or women her age. Women with children all had long hair. *It must be some kind of symbol,* Esera thought. An old woman surrounded by her grandchildren had her silver hair in a braid that reached all the way to her hips. A young pregnant woman's hair only reached her shoulders. And they all wore earings. Only the young with short hair had unpierced ears. Esera realized why she was being stared at: her earings were telling everyone she was married, but her hair was telling them she wasn't. She was also the only woman who was wearing pants, too, so that had to be strange to them. Esera ducked into an alley and removed her earings; she received about half as many stares after that. Unfortunately, the fact that she was in pants still got her a lot of attention, especially from the men.

One came up to her in the underground train station. "How much?" he asked in a low voice.

"Excuse me?" asked Esera.

"Don't play coy, missy, we both know why you're showing off those legs. Cross-dressers like you really are shameless. How much?"

Esera's cheeks burned crimson. *He thinks I'm a..!* She was too embarrassed to even finish the thought. "You watch your mouth, or you'll lose a lot more than money!" she hissed, slipping a hand in her bag to grasp her lightsaber. The man smirked, and vanished into the crowd. *Okay, I don't like that part of Stalimur,* she thought. *But was that just some pervert, or...* Esera let her mind reach out through the Force, and sense the feelings of those around her. Just as she feared, many of the men were eyeing her up, and the women were judging. She'd never felt so exposed while wearing so much. But when the train arrived at the station, Esera was given a break. On Stalimur, women and girls rode in separate cars from the men and boys. While she was still being judged, at least no one was oggling her... legs... *I suppose if every woman in this city wears a floor-length skirt, her legs might be considered lewd to expose,* thought Esera. Her face remained red hot as she found a place to stand.

The plan had been to take the train to the neighborhood her brother and sister lived in. Then... What then? Esera hadn't really thought about it. She assumed she could just show up and introduce herself. But today's revelations had made her reconsider. Clearly, she was an outsider here, and it was showing. Even now, she was being stared at. A girl, younger than her but not by much, kept glancing at her face, while another who could only be her little sister stared without reservation. She couldn't have been older than twelve. They must have been coming home from school, they wore matching dresses and carried bags with datapads in them.

To hell with it, I'll take them head on! "Can I help you?" asked Esera.

The older one blushed. "Oh, sorry, um, I didn't mean to stare," she stammered. It was like Esera was seeing a green-eyed version of herself with a slightly bigger nose and wider mouth. "You just look like someone I know."

Everyone looks like someone I know, and that someone is me! thought Esera.

"She means you look like the teacher she's in love with," the younger girl said.

"Shut up, Rina!" said the older, her cheeks going even more pink.

"It's true," Rina said, crossing her arms. "You look like Mister Komara, miss."

Mister Komara. A teacher. *No way,* thought Esera. "His name wouldn't be Toren Komara, would it?" Esera asked.

"Yes, that's his name, Toren Komara," said the older one. "And yes," she sighed, "you do look like him. Or like his sister, I should say."

"Huh." Esera couldn't believe it. Of all the people in this city, she'd run into a pair of siblings who knew her brother. The Force's hand was in everything. But before either of them could explore the issue, the young one spoke.

"Vira is in *love* with him, he's all she talks about," Rina said, rolling her eyes in the way only a twelve year old could. "She's going to ask him to marry her once this year is over."

"Uh, how old are you?" Esera asked Vira.

"Fifteen," she said. "But I'll be sixteen in a few months!"

"Are you sure you should be getting married so young?"

The girls stared at her. "That's the normal age to get married," Vira said.

Yeah, okay, I'm way out of my depth here, Esera thought.

"You're an off-worlder, aren't you?" asked Vira.

"Not exactly... I was born here, but I've spent most of my life elsewhere," said Esera. "I'm here to find my family, or what's left of it, at least."

"That explains the clothes," said Rina. She whispered very loudly: "You look like one of the girls at the starport who get paid to-"

"Rina!" Vira gasped. "Apologize, right now!"

"Sorry, but it's true," Rina said with a shrug.

"Yeah, I've already been... propositioned," said Esera, with a grimace. "I really wasn't expecting this place to be so different than..." *Than the upper levels of Coruscant? Than the Jedi Temple? Than Grievous's flagship? What* were *you expecting?* she asked herself silently.

"*Now arriving at Grenham Station,*" announced the train's speaker. "*Doors are to my left. Transfer to blue and orange lines one level below.*"

"This is my stop," said Esera.

"Oh, it's ours too," said Vira. She and Rina got up and followed Esera out. "You're from Grenham?"

"I guess I am," said Esera. "That's where my brother and sister live, and their address is the same one my parents had. I left here when I was about three years old, though. It's all a blur."

Grenham was a residential neighborhood, close to the edge of Veldevale, though no matter where one went, the ancient space elevator tether loomed over everything like a mountain. The neighborhood was one giant cluster of multi-level stone houses and apartments, crammed together wherever they would fit, split into chunks by winding narrow streets and little shady courtyards. There were plants everywhere, reminding Esera of an evergreen version of Theed City. Esera walked with the girls as far as their home... which was next to her destination. Esera's heartbeat was up, and her hands were trembling.

"This is our place," Vira said.

"I can tell you're from the neighborhood," said Rina. "You look exactly like Maira Oliniu. Just twenty kilos lighter!"

"That's rude, Rina," sighed Vira. "You're not going to be so thin after you've had two babies, you know."

Esera's mind was in a weird place. Hearing these two talk about her siblings so casually was so out of her ordinary experience that she didn't know what to think of it.

"You alright?" asked Vira. "You're looking a little pale. If you need to rest for a bit or something-"

"I'm fine," Esera said. "Just a little nervous. Besides, I live- well, used to live, right there." She pointed at the house not three meters away, which sat wall-to-wall with Vira and Rina's home, looking out into one of the many courtyards of the neighborhood.

"That's the Komara house," Vira said.

"Yeah, it is," said Esera. "My name's Esera. Esera Komara."

The girls tilted their heads. "You're a relative?" asked Vira.

"Yeah, that's my family. Excuse me, I should probably go tell them I'm here," said Esera. She gave them a polite nod, and turned back to the courtyard for a moment. *I know this place,* thought Esera. A long, long time ago she'd played in this courtyard with her siblings, and other faceless, nameless children who only existed as nothing more than faceless presences in a memory. She could remember her mother calling them in for dinner. Her mother and father, more faceless presences. Memories of feelings and voices. Her brother and sister were even less than that. They'd existed, that was all she knew of them. Then, the hunger came, and the fear, and the terror as a stranger in robes took her into the stars, to a new life she'd never asked for.

Esera stood at the front door of the home she was born in, her hand hovering over the bell. *Why am I so afraid?* she wondered. *I've fought at the side of General Grievous, I've been in shootouts with slavers, I've sailed across the surface of an event horizon, I've dueled Jedi and flown in space battles, why am I afraid of seeing the only family I've got left?* In her heart, she knew the answer. Her most formative years had been spent on the battlefield, or near it. She could fight and she could kill without hesitation. But family? That was something new. *What am I doing here?* Esera wondered, as she rang the doorbell. Moments later, the door slid open.

"Can I help you?" Esera's voice asked, but it wasn't Esera who spoke. The woman in front of her had her voice. She had her eyes. She had her face, almost. It was as if Esera was looking into a slightly-warped mirror. *Maira,* Esera thought, feeling a tightness in her throat. Maira was Esera, but just as Rina said, twenty kilograms heavier, and a few centimeters shorter, too. She was a full-figured, pear-shaped woman, rounder in her face and noticeably bustier, but there was no doubt of their blood being the same.

"Hey," said Esera, as all the greetings she'd planned flew out of her head.

Maira looked at her, the wheels in her mind spinning as she tried to make sense of what she saw. "I know you, don't I?" she asked in a quiet voice.

"Yeah, but it's been a while," Esera said, trying to smile. "Almost fifteen years, actually."

"Esera?" Maira reached out, touching her shoulders, disbelief on her face.

"It's me, Maira," said Esera, as that tightness in her throat grew. "I was, uh, in the neighborhood, thought I'd drop by and... uh... just check in, I guess." *Oh, I sound so stupid,* Esera scolded herself, as words continued to pour out of her mouth. "I mean, I guess it's kind of weird, just showing up after all this time, out of the blue, you know? Yeah, um, I didn't really think this through, I'm sorry if-"

Maira pulled her into a hug without another word. It was the first hug Esera had gotten since before Master Callo died. Through the Force, she sensed her sister's feelings; there was no suspicion, no doubt, no anger, just love and joy. Esera didn't try to hold back her tears.

The fact that Asajj Ventress had acquired a ship with a cloaking device saved a great deal of time for Shaak Ti. Her original plan had been to land on a part of the planet occupied by the Republic, and then cross on foot to the Kaleesh-controlled territories. Her traveling companions had elected not to go on a days-long hike and just land where they wanted to, right in the heart of the territory Grievous was believed to have come from.

Banshee's boarding hatch opened, and the three emerged into dusty, dry valley, lit gold by a late afternoon sun. When the hatch closed, Ventress's ship was invisible. "Everyone remember where we parked," Ahsoka said, shouldering her pack and pulling up her cloak's hood.

"Kaleesh aren't friendly to outsiders, are they?" asked Ventress, donning her own cloak. "I might look a little too Human for them..."

"We will be safe as long as we follow the guest right," Shaak Ti said. "Act with honor and respect and they will not lay a hand on you until you lay a hand on them."

"Huh... that doesn't sound like Grievous at all," Ahsoka said. "You sure he's from here?"

Their trek began. The valley was empty and desolate; devoid of water, it seemed nothing of note lived here. An hour of walking brought them out into a wider valley, a semiarid stretch of dry dirt and shrubs sustained by unseen groundwater. By then, the sun was approaching the peaks of the mountains behind them. They had yet to meet a single living person. *My estimates on population density might have been off,* she thought.

"Look, tracks," Shaak Ti said, pointing out the footprints for her younger companions.

"A lot of tracks," said Ahsoka. "A herd of animals?"

"The Kaleesh are mostly farmers and pastoralists," said Shaak Ti. "I think we'll find some kind of settlement wherever these lead."

"Why not?" yawned Ventress. But they didn't find a settlement before night fall. The three made their way back up to the mountains, and settled in a nook as the cold of night rapidly displaced the heat of day.

"I wish we landed closer to civilization," Ahsoka groaned, kicking a rock out from under her sleeping pad.

"Just think of Zeltros, Tano," said Ventress, yawning again. "It's working for me."

"It's good to have time away from technology," Shaak Ti told them. "We mustn't forget our connection with nature."

"Yes, Master Ti..." sighed Ahsoka.

Self-imposed exile or not, thought Shaak Ti, *she's still young, and has much to learn of patience. But should I be surprised? She practically grew up with Anakin Skywalker for a teacher.* There was much of Skywalker's reckless and action-seeking spirit in Ahsoka.

A morning of walking brought them to something barely worthy of the name of settlement. Two metal rails rested on the ground, stretching far and away in both directions, while a handful of dilapidated brick buildings clustered around. They saw their first Kaleesh, leathery-skinned, vaguely reptilian creatures, although certain features of the women would indicate they were not purely reptilian in nature. The men were tusked and horned, and both sexes had prominent claws on their fingers and toes, which poked through any footwear they wore. And some went without shoes. Their clothes were shabby, patched and faded, and they all wore scarves around their heads, perhaps to protect from dust.

Shaak Ti approached the oldest-looking Kaleesh in the little village, and bowed. Now was the moment of truth. "*Oh father, we are travelers from afar, seeking the city Qizanya. Which way should we take the iron road?*" she spoke, in her best Kaleesh. For a few moments, the old man stared at her, brow furrowed.

"*Go west, daughter. The train has not yet missed you*," the old man told her.

"Since when did you speak Kaleesh, Master Ti?" asked Ahsoka.

"I've been studying it recently," Shaak Ti said. "The rails are for a train, apparently. I didn't make the connection, he must have thought me very foolish to call it an iron road."

"Trains? On rails?" Ventress raised an eyebrow. "That's ridiculous."

Ridiculous or not, it was real, they soon found out. The train's approach was heralded by a cloud of smoke and sparks puffing out of the engine, which was an ungainly cylinder on wheels being pushed by pistons, jets of steam shooting out from them at intervals. Never in her life had Shaak Ti seen anything like it.

"What is *that?*" Ahsoka asked, looking at the machine like it was some kind of revolting vermin.

"Well, now I know where Grievous's love for ugly wheeled vehicles comes from," said Ventress. "A barbarian home for a barbarian half-droid."

As the train drew nearer, they saw a Kaleesh man shoving wood into a fiery portal at the back of the cylinder. "What reactor runs on wood?" asked Ahsoka. "What kind of place is this?"

"It's a steam engine, Ahsoka," said Shaak Ti, her mouth twitching up into a little smile. "I've only read about this ancient technology. I never thought I'd see it in use."

"A steam... engine..." Ventress didn't look impressed. "And we're going to ride it?"

"We certainly are," Shaak Ti said. She'd taken some Hutt peggats from the Temple's reserves just for this purpose. When it came time to pay the train's operator for passage, the man simply bit the peggat and nodded, satisfied that the gold was real.

Ahsoka and Ventress didn't like the steam train one bit. It was loud, slow, and every minor dip jolted the cars and threatened to throw them from their seats. The Kaleesh were very interested in what three alien women were doing on their planet, but none dared stare. There was etiquette concerning guests, Shaak Ti could sense that, and it was important not to break it until the guest did. As to what the etiquette was, she could only make an educated guess.

The train took them to a real city, of sorts. The arid plains and valleys transitioned to wooded hills and grassy fields. Sad-looking shacks were the first signs of habitation to greet them, made of scrap metal, mud bricks, and tarps. Many of the shacks had little corrals for livestock, animals Shaak Ti had never seen before and could only assume were native to the planet. Soon the buildings grew more solid, but they were still primitive brick-built constructs. "This must be Qizanya," she told the other two women.

"Is *he* from here?" asked Ahsoka, in a voice barely above a whisper.

"Not exactly." Shaak Ti explained what the Jedi knew about Grievous's past. It was almost certain he was one of the notorious Khagan Qymaen's elite warriors, and Qymaen had made Qizanya his seat of power after capturing it from the Yam'rii in a battle that won him the allegiance of the planet's hitherto-uncontrolled war-bands. The village had grown from a few dozen families to a city of hundreds of thousands in a single generation. Some of Qymaen's descendants still lived here. *They'd be a good place to start,* thought Shaak Ti, *they probably knew their father's warriors well.*

"So, that's our plan, just to ask this dead warlord's sons if one of their father's goons became a crazy killer cyborg?" Ventress asked.

"Yes," said Shaak Ti.

"What makes you think they'll even talk to us?" Ahsoka looked out the train car's window, at the young Kaleesh men with slugthrowers and swords clustered around a wheeled vehicle. "There's a war on, we're aliens, why wouldn't they just... eat us, or something?"

"The guest right, Ahsoka," Shaak Ti said. "It is not their way." *I hope it isn't their way,* she didn't say. Every culture had outliers who would go against its norms.

The three got off at Qizanya's station, and made their way to the main square of the city, where a grisly sight awaited them. In the middle of the square was a ring of pikes, each one had a head impaled on it, rotting in the sun. Several were clones, some were other Humans, some were Yam'rii, but their rank markings dangled from the pikes below the heads. All were company-level officers or higher. Outstanding among them was a face Shaak Ti recognize, vaguely. *Soonis, wasn't it?* she wondered, trying to remember that Jedi Knight's name. They'd only met once, over a decade ago, but he was still one of their order. Shaak Ti let herself have a moment of remembrance for the lone knight who had died in such an obscure and remote place as Kalee.

"Point taken," muttered Ahsoka.

"Yep, definitely Grievous's home," said Ventress, totally unfazed.

Across the square was a huge board, with names written on it. *The Martyrs of Qizanya,* it read. Each name was a warrior from this city who had died in battle. There were thousands of names on it. When Shaak Ti took a closer look, she noticed just how greatly women outnumbered men in the square. There was a war on, that was for sure, but daily life seemed to be going on as normal in the city. Farmers were selling produce and animals, merchants were plying their wares, and Shaak Ti even saw a cafe of sorts, where old women were sipping something like tea and keeping a watchful eye on a group of children playing with a kind of fuzzy creature that might have passed for a Corellian cat with an unusually long, prehensile tail.

Not so different after all, thought Shaak Ti. Most intelligent, humanoid species tended to have been subject to the same evolutionary pressures, resulting in psychologies that were familiar even in far-flung parts of the galaxy like Kalee. Yam'rii, though, were truly alien in their motivations and morality. That the war between Yam'rii and Kaleesh had been so brutal was only the natural result of two species so unlike each other, in body and in mind.

"Master Ti," Ahsoka piped up as they walked to the house of one of Qymaen's sons, "there's something I don't understand. All our records of the Kaleesh-Yam'rii war say that we intervened to stop the Kaleesh genocide of the Yam'rii. The Kaleesh were the aggressors. But this place is so... backwards! I mean, steam-powered trains and heads on spears... They're one step up from living in caves!"

"Never underestimate the will to win, Tano," Ventress said.

"She's right, Ahsoka. You can have all the technology in the galaxy, but without the will to accomplish anything, it won't matter," said Shaak Ti. That gave the young ex-Jedi something to think about, and Ahsoka was quiet for the rest of the walk.

"There's so many questions I want to ask," said Maira, "but if I ask them now, Toren's just going to ask them too when he gets home." They were in the kitchen, at a round, white, wooden table that tugged at Esera's memory. She took a seat where she could see down the hall to the front door.

"I'll answer everything I can," Esera said. Maira poured her some tea, and offered her some kind of baked treat, which Esera found to be delicious. Sugar wasn't commonly found in the Jedi diet, except in fruits and vegetables. And it certainly wasn't in ration packs in any great amount.

They weren't alone in the kitchen, either. Also at the table, in her own special chair, was a baby girl, who was intensely curious about the newcomer in her home. "What's your name?" asked Esera.

"This is Eline," Maira said, picking up her daughter. "She's ten months old."

"Named for our mother, right?"

"So you do remember mama's name!"

"No, actually, I learned it when I was figuring out what happened to all of you- but that's a story for later." Esera held out her hand, and little Eline reached out, placing a tiny hand on her finger. "Your neighbor Vira said you had two children?"

"You've met Vira already? And yes, Kelan is at school with Toren right now. They should be back soon." Kelan was Maira's five year old son, named for his grandfather on his father's side. Mister Harin Oliniu was a lieutenant commander on the first Stalimurian-built frigate, returning from a joint patrol with the Pentarchy in the Black Spiral sector, an exercise in solidarity with one of the many regional powers that had joined the Confederacy in the far and forgotten reaches of the Outer Rim.

"I met Vira and Rina on the train here. Vira's... interested, in your- uh, our brother, you know," said Esera.

"Oh, I know, she's talked to me about him," Maira said. She sat down next to Esera, baby in her arms. "She's a good girl, I think we can trust her to take care of Toren."

We, thought Esera. Ten minutes after showing up for the first time in a decade and a half, and Esera was already back in the family, as far as Maira was concerned. That tight feeling in her throat returned. Was this what it meant, to have a family? Was this what it meant to belong somewhere? *This is the life I could have had. I could have been here, at home, instead of out there trying to stop the galaxy from burning down too fast...*

"Vira will only be sixteen when she asks to marry him," said Esera, shaking herself from her thoughts. "How old is Toren?"

"Toren's twenty-five," said Maira. "A *little* young for marriage, but he's mature for his age, and he's got a secure job. I think he's ready."

Esera felt like someone had smacked her in the face with a wood plank. Sixteen was a good time for a woman to marry, but twenty-five was young for a man? *And* it was the woman who asked? "I'm going to be honest, Maira, I'm not sure what's going on here," Esera said, explaining her confusion to her sister.

"Everyone knows women grow up quicker than men," said Maira. "By sixteen, a woman is mature and responsible enough to start a family. That's always how it's been done on Stalimur. But men..." Maira smiled sheepishly, and lowered her voice. "Men are really kind of stupid, Esera, haven't you noticed? They're too flighty and indecisive to settle down until their later twenties, and most of them don't even have a career established until their thirties. Men are just big children, and it's a woman's duty to care for children. So we decide who we're going to marry and look after."

"I understand," said Esera, actually not understanding at all. Gender relations on Stalimur were very different from what she'd seen on Coruscant, growing up. The egalitarian world she was used to did not exist in this place. Everyone here had a role that was expected of them from the moment they were born. Maira gave her a not-so-quick rundown on how things worked on Stalimur. It was true that men ran the government and military, and worked most of the jobs. It was true theirs was a patrilineal society. But Maira did not agree at all that Stalimur's society was patriarchal, when Esera suggested it.

"Inside the house, a woman's word is law," she said. "In family affairs, a woman's word is law. And that's all that really matters. This planet is ours, Esera. We just let the men think they run it." Maira smirked.

"Sounds nice to me, I guess," said Esera. But in all truthfulness, she couldn't imagine herself getting married at sixteen. Then again, she couldn't imagine herself going to school at sixteen, or going shopping with friends at sixteen, or falling in love at sixteen. When she'd been sixteen, she'd been killing people in the largest war in galactic history, trying to stay alive another day, losing hope that she could survive with her soul intact. *No, stop it, don't think about it like that,* Esera told herself. *You're home, you have a family, this is no time for brooding!*

Maira drafted Esera to help with dinner. She was glad she'd taken time to learn a bit about cooking from Voyan, she wasn't totally useless in the kitchen. "Did the the Jedi really not teach you how to cook?" Maira asked. It was the first time the word *Jedi* had come up today.

"No," said Esera. "I've been learning from my ship's chief engineer."

"*Your ship's* chief engineer?" The look she gave Esera was the defining picture of incredulity.

"I know, right?" Esera said, smiling. "I love saying that."

Maira closed her eyes, and exhaled. "I have *so* many questions."

It was getting dark when Toren and Kelan came home. "Mama, we're back!" shouted a boy's voice. Kelan rushed to his mother and hugged her. Toren followed him in. He was a big, heavy-looking man, well-fed and strong, though barely a centimeter taller than Esera. Like her sister, he had the same eyes she did, and even a similar face, but for his obviously more masculine jawline. Toren froze mid-step, shock on his face, eyes locked on Esera.

"Boys, we have a surprise guest," Maira said to them, beaming happily. "Kelan, this is your aunt Esera. Toren, our little sister showed up today."

"Esera? Is that you?" asked Toren, in a faint voice.

"Hey," said Esera, giving him the same greeting she gave Maira. "It's been a while, hasn't it?"

Toren just picked her up and hugged her, so tightly Esera felt the air being squeezed from her. *Yeah, definitely strong,* Esera thought, wriggling in his grasp. Just like Maira, he was overjoyed to see her. "You have no idea how many questions I have, little sister," he said. "I never thought we'd see you again!"

"I didn't know I had an aunt," said Kelan, looking up at his mother.

"She's been gone a long time," Maira told him. "I didn't think she remembered us."

"In my defense, war does its best to drive the humanity out of you," Esera said, remembering too late children were in the room.

"You're in the war?" Kelan asked, eyes wide. "Papa's in the war too!"

"Your father and I are both in the fleet," said Esera. "Don't worry about us, though, we know how to take care of ourselves." A gush of anxiety spilled out of Maira's mind, as her thoughts turned to her husband, and there was a sense of unease from Toren. But Kelan was at the age where he trusted whatever adults said, and he truly did not worry. The three siblings had a silent agreement not to get into Esera's past while the children were eating dinner with them, even if Eline was too young to understand words.

Stalimurian food was heavy, hearty and served hot; Esera started to think her sister's fuller figure wasn't just the result of two babies. But after a cold day being sliced through by the mountain winds blowing down Veldevale's streets, she was happy to get something warm and solid in her stomach. Her brother and sister had a pleasant conversation about nothing in particular, which Esera found herself totally unable to partake in. She sat silently, trying to think of something to say, but nothing came to mind. What would they know about mad science being run by a droid, or a Skakoan's musings on the nature of the Force? Before long, Maira put Eline and Kelan to bed. Then, they sat down in front of an indoor campfire, like the one Esera had seen in the Sephi sisters' home on Raxus.

"What are these things?" asked Esera, pointing at it.

"That's a fireplace, Esera," Toren said, sitting her down on the couch between him and Maira. "They don't have those on Coruscant?"

"No," said Esera. "Not at the Temple, at least."

"You have to tell us everything. The last time we saw you, you were three years old and being taken away by the Jedi wizard," said Maira, holding her hand. "I cried for days, I didn't understand why mama and papa let them take you."

"They did it for us, Maira," Toren said. "The famine was bad that winter, we couldn't afford to feed five mouths. Esera was the smallest and weakest of us, she would have died if they hadn't let the Jedi take her."

Maira had been seven, Toren had been eleven when she'd been taken. Of course he'd have had understood the situation best. "I'm sure that's true," Esera said. "So, the last time you saw me, I was being taken away. And here's what happened after that..."

Esera told them her whole story with the Jedi Order; how she'd been scared and alone, how she'd eventually realized she wasn't going back home and she'd never see her parents again, how she'd struggled and failed again and again with the mysterious magic power called the Force. She told them about the handful of friends she'd made at the Temple, like Sanya, and how she'd only passed the Initiate Trials because no one expected her to get chosen as an apprentice afterwards. Esera had come to terms that a life in the Service Corps awaited her, a lifetime of menial labor that would be forgotten even before she died. Unimportant, unglamorous, but it would have suited her. Esera had never wanted greatness, fame, or power.

The topics of her master and the war remained. There was no way she'd be able to talk about Master Callo without falling to pieces, that wound was still too fresh, even after all this time. And Esera didn't want to get into the details of the war with her brother and sister, not this soon after coming into their lives again. "Let's just say I did get chosen to be an apprentice, but that's not something I want to get into now. We had about a year together, before the war began, and we got sent to the front."

"Wait, you were sent into battle? When you were..." Toren paused, counting on his fingers. "Fourteen?"

"Yeah," said Esera. "They needed every Jedi they had. We didn't think there was anything strange about it. We'd trained for combat."

"Good heavens," Maira said, in a strained voice. She hadn't let go of Esera's hand once since they sat down, her other arm was around Esera's shoulders, locking her in close.

Toren was staring into the fireplace, one hand on his chin. Anger glowed in his heart, Esera felt it like a fire. "If I'd known they were going to send a little girl to war, I would have booked a flight straight to Coruscant and taken you home. I never imagined you were out there in all of this. I always told myself you were safe in that temple."

"If I had been, I'd still be there now, a puppet of the Senate, just like the rest of them," Esera said. "I was in the war for three years, on the front lines. Something happened a few months back. I was asked to stand by and let something evil happen. I couldn't."

"So you defected?" asked Maira.

"Not exactly... I deserted, yes. I tried to lay low, yes. But, crazy story short, I ended up on Raxus and got asylum. And citizenship, actually," Esera said. The true events of the coup were classified, and would likely be classified for a very long time. Grievous didn't want the galaxy to know how close he'd come to finally getting killed, or that a Jedi exile had aided him. And even if they hadn't been classified, would anyone believe Esera if she told them what had really happened that day? *No, probably not.*

"But you said you have a ship now!" Maira said. "How did that happen?"

"*You* have a *ship?*" Toren gaped at her.

"Uh... it was for services rendered," said Esera. "It's all secret stuff under wraps. Let's just say I've done some really important missions in the last few months and everyone agreed it's better if I have a ship to operate from. Two ships, actually, a big one and a small one. The big one is where I live now, I guess, the small one... well, it was the property of a very bad man, and I took it since he hadn't used it in over a decade. Fair game, right? I left the big one at Raxus, I took the small one here." There was no point in mentioning it was a former Sith vessel with a cloaking device. The Sith were nothing more than an obscure note in the murky depths of history, to them.

"Our little sister, all grown up," said Maira, with a sad smile. "I don't know how much of this we should tell Harin."

"He's your man, Maira, so it's your call," Toren said.

"Harin has lost friends and family to Loyalist privateers. His father's ship was destroyed by them, last year. And he knows the Jedi took you, Esera. I couldn't go into this marriage without telling him that whatever's in your blood could be in our children's blood too."

"I don't think you have to worry about that," said Esera, "I didn't feel anything unusual in them. But, yeah, meeting your husband could be pretty awkward."

"You'll have to," said Maira. "You're a part of this family, no matter what your past is. Harin will have to accept that."

Harin would return in two days. Since Maira insisted Esera meet him, so they the whole family could be together for the first time ever, Esera found herself stuck on Stalimur with nothing but the clothes on her back and money in her pocket, plus one lightsaber and some assorted hygienic products in her bag. In the end, Maira just dumped all her old clothes on Esera.

"None of these fit me anymore," she sighed, looking fondly at pile of dresses. "These were mama's, from when she was our age, but they were always a little long on me. And now they're too small, too! You'll have to adjust the sleeves and hems a little but I think they'll be perfect for you. Besides, if you'd grown up with us, you'd be used to hand-me-downs."

"Alright," said Esera, finding herself with another new wardrobe. Again. At least Stalimurian fashion was far more modest and simple than Raxian. Esera discovered that the local style of dress was well-suited to Veldevale. The neckline was just under her chin in most cases, and the skirts came with a minimum of two layers, but more usually three, and every woman wore thick knitted stockings. The hems of the skirts were made with a heavy, robust fabric that was both wear-resistant and formed something of a seal against the ground, preventing the cold wind from entering. Esera had one major problem, though: underwear, as she knew it, was not worn on this planet, for ease of using the refresher.

"I've never heard of anything like that, for men or women," Maira said, giving her a strange look. "The rest of the galaxy must be a very strange place!"

Oh no, Esera thought. At last, after all these years, Esera finally realized why the Humans of the Core worlds thought the Tionese were still the same barbarians of Xim's day.

A tingling feeling in Shaak Ti's montrals combined with a sudden disturbance in the Force gave her a few seconds' warning that something bad was about to happen. She'd hardly turned around when she saw missiles streaking up into the sky, shot from somewhere within the city. "Get down!" Shaak Ti hissed, pulling Ahsoka and Ventress by their arms. They hit the gravel street, and waited. Moments later, an explosion a few blocks away sent a pressure wave washing over them, and pebbles of brick rubble rained down.

"A nice welcome from your side," Ventress said, brushing dust off her cloak.

"They don't even know we're here," said Shaak Ti.

"You didn't tell our forces that we were infiltrating a city they're attacking?" Ahsoka groaned.

"This is a Jedi mission, not a Republic mission."

Further down the street, the Kaleesh were investigating the crater left in an intersection, which had taken the corner of a building with it.

"What was... whatever just happened?" asked Ahsoka.

"A rocket," said Shaak Ti. "The Yam'rii use them to attack targets from far away. But their guidance systems are... lacking."

"Or maybe they just want to cause fear," Ventress said, with a smirk. "Random attacks on random people, it demoralizes the target population."

"That's sounds like a Separatist tactic." Ahsoka narrowed her eyes at the former assassin.

"It's an everybody tactic, my dear," said Ventress.

Not the Jedi, Shaak Ti thought. The Yam'rii, though, fell into Ventress's category, without a doubt. They had a very hard time making a distinction between civilian and warrior, when it came to the Kaleesh. That was fair, though regrettable; the Kaleesh had invaded their colonies and not offered them that distinction, only a generation ago. Shaak Ti watched the Kaleesh comb through the rubble, searching for survivors. A large wheeled vehicle rolled up, a blade-like contraption mounted on its front, which pushed the rubble out of the street. *How did these people even get into orbit, let alone launch an interstellar war?* she wondered. Ahsoka did have a point about that. A very good point, that was starting to nag at her, despite her statement about the will to win. *I don't think we have the full story here...*

It was with that thought in mind that Shaak Ti led Ahsoka and Ventress to their destination. She'd done a lot of digging on the Separatist shadowfeeds to find out the location of one of Qymaen's sons, the oldest survivor among the eight boys who were alive at present. His house was big, but modest, built only with what was necessary. The sounds of metal work came from inside. Shaak Ti wrapped her knuckles on the wood door, and moments later, it swung in on hinges.

The Kaleesh man was tall, far taller than any of the three women, and he stared down at them with narrowed golden eyes. For a second, Shaak Ti was struck by resemblance to Grievous. He'd stared down at her just like that, when she'd been briefly in his custody. This man had no mask, though. He leaned on a crutch, and Shaak Ti saw his left leg ended at the knee. "It is not common to see galactics here," he said, in the standard tongue of the known universe, though heavily accented. "I suppose you have a particular reason to come to my home, of all homes in this city?"

"Yes," Shaak Ti said, taken aback. *No courtesies at all, are they all so like Grievous in their bluntness?* "We've come seeking the son of Khagan Qymaen."

"You have him," said the Kaleesh. "I am Faisaen. Faisaen the Gunsmith, as they know me. Who are you?"

"I am Shaak Ti, these are my compatriots Ahsoka and Asajj," said Shaak Ti, gesturing to the other two. "We're here on a historical mission, investigating the Huk war and your father."

"Yes, it always comes back to him, doesn't it?" Faisaen sighed. "I see you are unarmed."

Shaak Ti spread her open hands. "We come as guests," she said.

"You may enter, come in." Faisaen lurched away, crutch thumping against the wood plank floor. He was suspicious of them, she could feel that in the Force, but since she'd invoked the guest right, Faisaen was not going to turn them away. Not immediately, at least. Shaak Ti got a glimpse of a workshop, full of slugthrowers in varying states of disassembly. *So he really is a gunsmith.* The Kaleesh seated them in some kind of common room, upon cushions on the floor. No furniture as Shaak Ti knew it existed in the house, everything was built on the assumption one was standing or on the ground. "Speak," said Faisaen.

Ahsoka and Asajj glanced at each other, before both turned to Shaak Ti. "I'm not sure where to start," she said. "We know very little about Khagan Qymaen. He was a powerful warrior and united your people against the Yam'rii, and won an important victory on this very ground."

"The *huk,* yes, that's a good place to begin," said Faisaen, nodding. "But I am the wrong man to ask about full history of that. Zharajayn would know more, he lived through it and was at my father's side from the beginning. I can only tell you about Qymaen. And of that, I can only tell you what I know, as his son."

"He was a great warrior, wasn't he?" asked Shaak Ti.

"There is no doubt," said Faisaen. "My father used to say he was born into war. He was only a few years old when his parents were taken in chains by the huk, with the rest of the village adults... barring one priestess he used to grumble about whenever our big sister Ronderu scolded him..." Faisaen related to them the story of Qymaen's youth, as he knew it, the tale of a young warrior growing in skill and glory, his reputation spreading throughout the scattered war-bands of Kalee resisting the aliens. *Resisting* would have been an odd choice of words for those raging an aggressive war, but Faisaen did not believe the Kaleesh were the aggressors, he truly did not, his mind and heart were open on that matter. The war had been started by the Yam'rii. They'd come here to enslave the Kaleesh, and had been succeeding at it, until Qymaen's rise to power. *The Jedi Archives are wrong,* Shaak Ti thought, keeping her face perfectly calm. *Someone lied to us...*

"He never did speak much about the early days," Faisaen was saying. "Something tragic happened, that turned him into the man we children knew. Our big sister, his eldest daughter, firstborn in the family by quite a few years, she was named Ronderu. I mentioned her before, didn't I?"

"Yes," said Shaak Ti. *Are this man's reminiscences important, or we are just indulging him?* She wondered, but kept her mouth shut. Who knew what they could learn by going down unexpected paths?

"Whoever she was named for, she was important to our father. Who was the original Ronderu? We never did find out. When our sister asked where her name came from–it's not a name our tribe uses, you see–he would not answer. Big sister Ronderu was like an eleventh mother to us all, especially the youngest of us. There were thirty of us, once, you know."

Ahsoka made a low whistle, the way Skywalker would have. "I hope you all didn't live in *this* house," she said.

"No, the house we grew up in got turned into a shrine," said Faisaen.

"What happened to the rest?" asked Ahsoka. "Did you they move to other towns, or something?"

Faisaen stared at the young Togruta, his expression blank, but a knot of dark feelings emanated out through the Force. "They're dead," he told her.

"Oh." Ahsoka looked away. "Uh, sorry to hear that."

"My father took the war to the huk, ending decades of humiliation. He freed our people on their worlds, he brought war to the alien invaders in their own homes. We Kaleesh are not a dishonorable people. We do not slaughter wantonly, nor do we kill the innocent. But the story is that we welcomed the huk as guests, and they repaid us in treachery, binding our world in chains. No man, woman, or child was spared what they did to us. For that blasphemy, there can be no answer but the justice of the blade. We will never be ashamed of what we did to them, because we did nothing to be ashamed of. They broke the most sacred law of the gods, and they received the gods' punishment." Faisaen's fist clenched, the only outward sign of the sullen anger in his heart. "This is when the Republic arrived... And the accursed Jedi."

Ahsoka didn't flinch at those words, Shaak Ti could tell this wasn't the first time she'd encountered this attitude towards the Order. "Galactic history tells a different story," Shaak Ti said, in the most neutral voice she could muster. The Kaleesh man was certain in the truth of his version, offending him would get them nowhere. "We have been told you started the war with the-" she caught herself, before she said Yam'rii, "*huk*, and they called the Republic to save themselves."

"Yes, the bugs would lie, wouldn't they?" Faisaen waved his hand and shook his head. Ventress's eyes narrowed, and a shadow of concern passed over her spirit. "The Republic sent their Jedi and their money, their guns and their ships. They demanded we give up all we had taken, and repay the huk for what we had done to them. The gods would not allow that. We *had* to fight. What people meekly accept their servitude? What people willingly go back to their chains? My father told me our ancestors would throw themselves from the slavers' ships as they took off, they chose death and dignity over subjugation and humiliation. That is what it means to be Kaleesh. Against the might of the Republic, we fought. You have seen our world, oh historian. Kalee is not a rich planet. We are not a rich people, not in material or resources. No matter my father's plans, or the valor of his warriors, we could not stem the tide. Our armies were broken, our meager fleet scattered, our newly-built cities razed to the ground. And when it was over, when my father had surrendered to save those of us who remained..." Faisaen sneered, staring off into space. "They put a tax on us. We didn't even have a word for tax, before then. That tax would be to fund the reconstruction of the huk worlds, that had been built on the bones of our people."

For the three Force-sensitives, Faisaen's anger burned dimly, like a red ember nestled in the ashes of memory. They did not speak, sensing his tale was not yet done. "I do not hate the Republic," he said at length. "Victory is the right of the strong. The Republic was stronger than us. But I do hate the Jedi. We had heard whispers of the wise sorcerers from distant stars, more powerful than even our mightiest shamans. They had but to look into our hearts and see the righteousness of our holy struggle. I do not know if they did, but they chose to abide by the lies of the huk and their friends in the Republic."

"You hate the Jedi because they didn't think you were right?" asked Ahsoka, raising her eyebrow.

"No," said Faisaen. "I cannot hate a man for keeping faith to his lord, even when his lord is wrong. Loyalty is more valuable than any currency. I hate the Jedi because they were the ones responsible for the sanctions."

"Sanctions?" repeated Shaak Ti. Economic sanctions had been the weapon of choice by the Jedi for centuries, when governments could not be reasoned with but no one wished to spill blood. But the sanctions targeted individuals of influence and power, to pressure them into rethinking their ways.

"Naturally, the Kaleesh refused to pay the tax put upon us. So we were sanctioned. This was a disaster even greater than the war, for a world with little industry, even before the huk came." Faisaen glanced to the side, eyes narrowed. "I did not lose my leg in war, oh historian. I lost it to an infection when I was twelve. Lacking off-world medicine, amputation was my only choice."

Amputation! That word only survived in historical medical documents, from an ancient age before bacta. Kalee was still in that ancient age, it seemed to Shaak Ti. "That is unusual," said Shaak Ti. "The Republic does not often sanction medicinal supplies."

"Then we were an unusual case. Kalee was one step short of being put under blockade. Plague and famine ravished the lands, my father could do nothing. He was a warlord, not a statesman or docor, he knew nothing about crop yields or epidemics. Soon, those plagues and famine came here, to Qizanya. One by one, we died." Faisaen folded his hands together, a distant look in his eyes. "Do you know how shameful it is, for a warrior to face a foe he cannot fight? To stand by, powerless, as it destroys what he loves? My father was a cold man. But even then, there was still a spark of warmth left in him. That warmth died with Ronderu."

"Your oldest sister, right?" asked Ahsoka.

"Yes, the oldest of all of us, by a few years. When she passed, my father was silent for a long time. He looked to the heavens and asked if it was not enough to take her once from him. That's how we knew of the first Ronderu. It's been almost eighteen years since that day, I still remember it as clear and clean as the northern wind... That was the end of our father, as we knew him. A new determination took hold of him, one that turned his heart to iron. He left Kalee, to serve as a hired thug for off-worlders, in return for their aid. We rebuilt our world, while he lead the collection-armies of the bankers against their debtors." The Kaleesh man frowned. "By then, only eight of us boys were left, out of our thirty brothers and sisters. We were the oldest ones, the strongest. We went our separate ways, and left great deeds to other men. We saw what our father had become, we did not want that for ourselves."

"This wasn't the end of Qymaen's story, though. He came back to Kalee, where he died in a shuttle crash," said Shaak Ti, pausing to give Ventress a questioning look. The former assassin was visibly shaken, but she refused to speak.

"The shuttle bombing. Yes. The huk desecrated our burial grounds we left behind. They could not be content with the ruin they'd brought upon our race, they had to disturb the spirits of the dead as well... Shameless bugs. That was enough for my father. He came home in a terrible rage, a fury we'd never seen before, and he called up his old retinue. They made for the huk colonies, to wage their own private war until they were martyred on the battlefield. But as their shuttle took off, it exploded, and crashed into the sea," said Faisaen. Now he too felt uncomfortable, but he was hiding it better than Ventress. "They said it was the Jedi behind it. Maybe it was. Maybe it wasn't. But that was the end of Qymaen jai Sheelal."

Grievous told Yoda the shuttle he was on was bombed by the Jedi, thought Shaak Ti. *This part of the story adds up... except for the perpetrators.*

"Jedi don't bomb shuttles!" Ahsoka blurted out. "That's not the Order's way!"

"Ahsoka, calm yourself," Shaak Ti said, putting a hand on the younger Togruta's shoulder. "I'm sorry for your loss, Faisaen."

"That was many years ago," said Faisaen, doing his dismissive wave again. "We're coming up on eight, soon."

Eight years ago? That was five years before the war began... Grievous has been around longer than we thought.

"Eight years..." At last, Ventress spoke. "That lines up perfectly," she said, staring at Faisaen. "The way you speak, the way you move, the gestures you make, it's just like *him*. Faisaen, your father isn't dead. He's Grievous."

The silence that fell on the room was so heavy, Shaak Ti thought the floor might break under it. Ahsoka had a look of terrified revelation on her face, while Ventress was shocked and amazed at the same time. Shaak Ti kept her composure, and so did Faisaen.

"You knew, didn't you?" she asked, as his utter lack of reaction made it clear this was nothing new to him.

"*Of course* I knew," Faisaen said, in a tired voice, his eyes narrowed and head tilted, just the way Grievous did. "Do you think I couldn't recognize my father out there, even as a monster inside that blasphemous abomination of a sarcophagus?"

The three women were again slammed by surprise. *Blasphemous abomination is one way to put it...* That attitude towards Grievous from his own son was the last thing she expected. "Those are strong words," Shaak Ti said.

"The gods made us as we are, oh historian," said Faisaen. He put his hand on the stump of his leg. "Whatever harm befalls us, befalls us for good. It is our burden to bear, until the end of our lives. This is the way of things. To replace what was made in the image of the gods... that is arrogance without parallel. The *thing* my father became..." He closed his fist, and breathed deeply. "It is a violation of every law of mortal and god alike. But there are those here who believe this happened to my father for a reason. They believe he was chosen as a sacrifice, to become the scourge of the gods unleashed upon the whole galaxy, as punishment for its sins. Kalee's wrath incarnated, the demon unleashed in the city of wonders."

"What a charming religion," Ahsoka muttered under her breath.

"Is yours any better?" asked Faisaen.

"Excuse me?" Ahsoka aksed in turn.

"The man who became Grievous told me the Jedi were aliens in cloaks. Now three aliens in cloaks appear at my door, asking after him," said Faisaen. "I am Kaleesh. I am primitive and brutish, a bloody-minded savage who rides in wheeled machines, no better than the barbarians of old. But I am not stupid. I knew what you were the moment you showed up here."

Ventress and Ahsoka shifted where they sat; Shaak Ti gave the Kaleesh a calm stare. "And yet, you welcomed us," she said. "And told us what we wanted to know."

"I did, oh *historian*." Faisaen snorted at the word, another action that got a rise from Ventress. "She who comes to us a guest, comes with no fear. But she who comes to us sword in hand, by the sword shall perish. Your predecessors came with sword in hand, you did not. That is why we are talking now, and why I am not a martyr on my way to paradise. I have told you my story, oh Jedi, but why are you were? Why do you seek to learn of my people and our struggles? What difference will it make to you?"

"The Jedi way is to seek understanding," said Shaak Ti. "We have been straying from this for some time now, I fear. The consequences have been a disaster for the whole Galaxy, Kalee included. Our worst enemy came from this place. We set him on his path, however indirectly. By understanding what we have created, we may be able to..." *kill him,* was what Shaak Ti considered saying. But the words died in her mouth. Telling this man she was going to kill his father didn't sit right with her, even after everything he'd said. "...Set things straight. There will be a reckoning, before this is over, I think."

"The gods always have the final say," Faisaen agreed.

They departed soon after, part with awkwardness, part with mutual relief. "Well, that was enlightening," said Ventress, quickly back to her usual self. "I was hoping for some fun, but getting dirt on an enemy is fine too. It's off to Zeltros next, for me!"

"Can't believe we came all this way for story time with a one-legged gunsmith," Ahsoka grumbled under her breath. But she was troubled. When she looked around at Qizanya, at the poverty and squalor unheard of in civilized regions, the manacle-scars on the wrists and necks and ankles of the old men and women, the missing limbs and eyes and faces, the great list of the fallen sons and daughters of the city, the heads of her former comrades-in-arms displayed in the square... *Do you see it, Ahsoka?* Shaak Ti wondered. *Do you see what we've let happen? This is but one world of millions.*

There was going to be a reckoning, Shaak Ti had no doubt. For the Yam'rii and Kaleesh, for the Republic and the Separatists, for the Jedi and the Sith. Would there be a reckoning for Grievous? *Being entombed in that body may be the worst possible fate, for him,* she thought. *Maybe these Kaleesh have it right, maybe he is a sacrifice chosen to serve as a scourge. Only by abandoning everything he valued could he become what he needed to be. What is that? The destroyer of the Republic? Of the Jedi Order? Dooku said the Order was corrupt, Qui-Gon Jinn always took after him, and so did Olor Callo... and now Olor Callo's apprentice is working with Grievous. There's no such thing as coincidence, not with Force. This is happening for a reason.* A worrying notion entered her mind: Grievous might be playing exactly the role the Force intended for him. And that meant Shaak Ti and the entire Jedi Order might be completely wrong.

Harin Oliniu arrived late on Esera's third night on Stalimur. Maira was determined to stay awake until he came home, so Esera stayed up with her in the sitting room, eyes on the hall to the front door.

"They're talking about opening up the southern continent for recolonization. It's been abandoned for centuries, maybe longer, you know," Maira was saying, babbling on about whatever news she'd heard that day. "All these babies being born, lately, they all have to find somewhere to live... The Komaras have been in Veldevale forever, right in this very house. Toren would keep the house in our bloodline and please our ancestors' spirits, but me? Well, once the war's over, I'd like to take Harin and the children south."

"Yeah?" asked Esera, totally lost.

"Oh, yes, I would. Just think of all the empty land! The government might even pay people to live there, that would be nice-"

The front door opened, and Maira leaped up, going from relaxed to full alert in seconds.

"Maira?" came a voice.

"Harin!" Maira answered.

In the entrance of the sitting room appeared a man in a crisp black uniform, with blue piping on the collar and cuffs and the Separatist hex icon on the shoulders. Harin looked a few years older than Voyan, Esera thought. He had the same black hair like all Stalimurians, though with a salting of grey at his temples. In build, he was the anti-Toren: tall, for a Stalimurian, but lacking Toren's girth and musculature. He was handsome, though, Esera couldn't deny that. *Like a Ricimer Eemon in ten years,* thought Esera. And without the Carammite beard. *So, even more attractive... Great. Keep your eyes off your brother-in-law, Esera!*

Neither Maira nor Harin wasted time on words, Maira just jumped into his arms, took his face in her hands, and kissed him. Esera could feel the mix of love and passion swirling around them, she saw how they embraced each other, she watched their hands move across each other's bodies. A burning heat spread across Esera's face, and she looked away. Unbidden, dangerous thoughts voiced themselves: *What's it like, to be held like that, to be touched like that, to be kissed like that?* Her heart was suddenly racing, as shameful fantasies danced across her mind's eye. *What's it like for someone to want you that much? I don't know... But I'd like to.* And that was a frightening idea.

"I think we're embarrassing our guest," Maira finally said, sounding breathless as Harin gently placed her back on the floor.

"Oh, we have a guest?" asked Harin.

"Harin, this is my sister, Esera."

"Hey," said Esera, doing her best to smile and trying to will the blood out of her cheeks.

"Esera, this is Harin, my husband." Maira stood next to him, arm in arm. Whether that was out of affection or to slow him down in case he tried anything, Esera didn't know.

"Maira, didn't you say Esera got taken by the Jedi, fifteen years ago?" asked Harin, doubt and concern spreading across his face.

"Yeah, that was then," Esera said, as her her sister struggled to find an explanation. "I'm not with the Jedi anymore."

"Mhm..." Harin was on guard, she felt his suspicion and something else just short of hostility.

Esera sighed. "You and Voyan are two of a kind, aren't you?" she muttered. "Say the word Jedi and you're ready to pull the trigger." And Harin was armed, Esera saw the blaster pistol in the holster on his hip.

"Esera's a good girl," said Maira, patting her husband's hand. "She came over to our side when she saw what the Republic was doing. Now she's in the fleet, like you."

"Really?" asked Harin, looking skeptical.

"You're talking to Captain Esera Komara of Confederate Naval Intelligence, Lieutenant Commander Oliniu," Esera said. "If you've got doubts over my loyalty, you can take it up with my boss. That's General Grievous, by the way."

Harin stood still for a moment. Esera had *not* made a good first impression, but since he wasn't trying to kill her, she supposed she could have done worse. The man had lost his father and brothers-in-arms to Republic-backed privateers, she was never going to make a good impression in the first place. At least this way, she could establish herself as someone who wasn't going to be pushed around.

"Didn't you say she was four years younger than you?" asked Harin to his wife.

"She is," said Maira.

"She's a captain, at what, eighteen years old?"

"*Almost* eighteen. I've got a few weeks of seventeen left," Esera said, standing up and stretching. "Yeah, I'm a bit young, but I earned it." She *really* wished she could go into detail, and explain how a good percentage of news in the last few months had been caused be her, but she had the feeling he wouldn't believe her anyway. "Well, it was nice to meet you, Harin. I'm going to bed now."

"Goodnight, Esera," said Maira, kissing her cheek.

"Goodnight Maira."

On her way out, she heard Harin say: "I expected a Jedi sorceress to be more fearsome... But she looks just like you did when we got married."

"Of course she does, she's my sister," Maira said.

She looks just like you did when we got married... Esera repeated to herself, her face burning hot again. A depraved idea entered her mind unbidden. *No, no, no! Brother-in-law,* brother, *remember that! But that's not a blood relation- Stop it!* Sleep did not come easily for Esera that night.

Harin's presence was just another complication on top of an already complicated situation for Esera. Whenever they were in speaking distance of each other, there was a distinct awkwardness in the air. For Harin, it was because he did not like having a former Jedi near him, his wife, and his children; he didn't trust her, he didn't like her. For Esera, it was because she was a very young woman whose body was being pumped full of hormones stuck near her sister's handsome husband. The thoughts that came to her at the worst times filled her with shame, guilt, and to her horror, excitement. *Just keep your head on straight,* Esera, she told herself, *this will pass*. She'd seen infatuation back at the Temple, discouraged as it was, it could come and go in just a few days.

Esera soon learned that she had more than one problem with Harin. They'd hardly been under the same roof for more than thirty-six hours, but after spending those thirty-six hours trying to avoid her in a house that was dwarfed by Grievous's tower-top lair on *Invisible Hand,* Harin had had enough. Kelan was at school, Toren was home for lunch, Maira had the four of them plus her infant daughter in the kitchen, sitting together.

Poor Maira was the one who set it all off. "You said your starship's engineer taught you how to cook?" she asked.

"Yeah," Esera said. "Lieutenant Voyan..." *What can I say about Voyan?* thought Esera. She hardly knew him. "Voyan's not terrible, in fact he's good to have around, but he doesn't like me much, I think."

"What reason could a Separatist officer *possibly* have to dislike you?" Harin asked, giving her a flat stare.

"I've given him a lot of reasons *to* like me," Esera said. "He's only alive because of me," *and was only in danger because of me,* "and he's finally realized his dream of being a chief engineer on a starship, because of me."

"Maybe, just maybe, he doesn't like you because you're a Jedi." Harin's arms were crossed, his mouth tightly set. Maira gave him a look, while Toren just ate his lunch and watched with nervous anticipation. Little Eline wasn't even aware anything was happening.

"I *was* a Jedi. They've tried to kill me three times, you know!" said Esera. "They've cut off my hand and tried to stab me through the heart!"

"How sad," Harin said. "I suppose I'll tell that to my father's empty grave. There's a Jedi working with us, her pirates vaporized you but she lost her hand, that makes up for everything, right?"

A little part of Esera's mind realized this was what it was like to be Voyan, to have a switch flipped in her head, going from calm to furious in half a second. "Oh, so I'm singularly responsible for every act the Republic has ever done, am I?" asked Esera with a scowl. "Will you be taking responsibility for everyone Grievous has murdered, then?"

"Esera-" Maira started, but Esera wasn't going to have it. Neither was Harin.

"Are you really so arrogant as to think you can just dismiss everything you were?" he asked her, speaking with a calm, cold anger. "All the blood you spilled in the name of the Republic, all the people you killed, people like my father, the friends I'd grown up with, my neighbors- did you think that'd all just wash away because you decided to switch sides? Is this all just a game to you sorcerers? This war is real, real people are dying, because of you. And here you are, sitting in my kitchen, living in my house, like none of it ever happened."

For a moment, Esera didn't know what to say. She wanted to scream, she wanted to cry, she wanted to smash this mans' face in for insinuating that she, Esera Komara, unwilling soldier whose hands were just as blood-soaked as the rest of the Jedi Order that began this war, could even begin to think this war was a game. But she knew she would never get sympathy from a man like Harin, who had so recently lost his father and his brothers-in-arms. Esera took a deep breath, and spoke, for once keeping the tremble of emotion out of her voice.

"If that's what you think, then do something about it. Go on," said Esera, almost whispering. "Strike me. Shoot me. I won't stop you." Whatever answer Harin expected, this hadn't been it. His brow furrowed, and he made to speak-

"Absolutely not!" Maira said, finding her voice again. "Both of you, stop this! I won't have you antagonizing each other, not in my house! And Esera, how could you say something like that? Your life isn't worth that little to you, is it?"

That question stumped Esera as much as her response had stumped Harin. Toren, who until now had kept his mouth shut, leaned over to little Eline. "Hey, kid," he whispered, "notice how they all forgot this is actually *my* house?" The baby, of course, couldn't answer in words, but she looked around curiously.

"Toren, don't even start," Maira said, giving him a death glare.

He raised his hands. "I'm not doing anything, most gracious and most merciful and ever-beloved sister."

"I'm sorry, Maira," Esera said, not feeling sorry at all. "I can see I'm not welcome at this table. I think I'll go for a walk."

"Esera-" Maira tried to say again, but she was already gone.

What if he had done something? Esera wondered, once she was outside in the cold, clear mountain air. *How stupid would that have been? "What are you going to do, shoot me?" said a woman shot in Veldevale today...* She walked on, simmering in discontent. Everything was her fault, it always was. Whether from Grievous or a slave, for the Republic or the Confederacy, Esera always ended up taking the blame for every evil that faction had done, and what good she'd tried to do as a one dumb girl against the galaxy was always ignored. Her brother and sister were exceptions. But how far could she really trust them? That she'd been a soldier for the Republic had never crossed their minds. Now that they knew she'd killed Separatists and the Jedi were trying to kill her, maybe her welcome in the whole house would wear out, just as it had at the table.

Her fears proved to be true. Harin was colder than ever after Esera came back, while Toren made a hasty exit back to his school. Maira acted the same as always, but Esera could feel what she was feeling, and she was uncomfortable. Confusion and doubt filled her heart whenever Esera was nearby, and while Maira kept smiling, her husband's words and sister's attitude had shaken her confidence about the situation.

The next day, Esera decided to get answers. "Maira, am I the problem here?"

"What?" Maira asked, as she folded laundry in her bedroom. "Why would you ask that?"

"Ever since Harin and I had our... disagreement, you've been different," said Esera. "I can't turn off my Jedi abilities, Maira. I can sense your feelings. You're not comfortable with me here anymore."

Maira put the dress she was folding down, a troubled look on her face. "I see," she said. "I wasn't aware you were... listening in, on us, like that."

"I can't passively mind-read. Well, I can, but it's not on-command," said Esera, before smacking herself. "Oh, that really doesn't help my case, does it? Why did I say that? Look, Maira, I'm not trying to eavesdrop on what goes on inside your heads. But I can't help but sense the emotions of others. And I've sensed enough that I need to ask if I should go."

"What? No!" Maira said, too quickly. But there was a part of Maira that wanted to say *yes.* "Esera, no matter how long you were gone, I love you, you're a part of this family, you always will be. But..."

Here it is, thought Esera. "But?"

"The things you said yesterday, they bothered me," Maira said. "I thought back on things I'd noticed about you. How quiet you get sometimes, how you're always glancing at the doorways, how your right hand twitches like that, how I've only seen you smile once or twice since you got here... It reminds me of some of Harin's men. They come back from battles, different. And it's not a good difference. What you said yesterday, how you asked Harin to kill you right there, without even blinking..." Maira trailed off, looking away, hurt and worry on her face, and fear too.

I glance at doorways? But Maira's point was clear: Esera was different. Veldevale was a city where people were not different. These people had no idea what it was like, to live every day with death only a moment away. They didn't know what it felt like to take a life, or how it didn't feel like anything at all to take a hundredth life, or a thousandth. They'd never been shot, stabbed, and sliced, they'd never been hunted by slavers, corporate special forces, and Jedi. It wasn't their fault, but the lives they lived and the life Esera lived were, quite literally, worlds apart.

"I understand," said Esera, a grim mood coming over her. "Thank you for being honest, Maira."

"Esera, please don't think I hate you!" Maira said, taking her hand. "You're my sister, that means more than anything to me, even if you were gone for fifteen years. There's a place for you here, always, no matter what we might have to work through."

"Yeah..." *I don't think so,* Esera thought. Maira believed she was being honest, but her mind was so open that Esera could *almost* sense the familial obligation overriding her true desires.

"Come here," said Maira, pulling her into a hug. "I can't pretend I understand what you've been through- what you're still going through. I can't. But if you ever just need someone to talk to, I'm here for you. Always."

It was a nice sentiment, she had a genuine desire to help, Esera could feel that. But what could Maira offer her? Her sister's experience was so different from hers that they had no common ground, besides being women born on Stalimur in the Komara family. Maira's life was a story of simple success. Maira lived in the center of light and life, surrounded by her loved ones. Esera could only look in, like a stranger through a window, close by, yet a world apart. A dejected envy stirred in her heart. Maira had love, Maira had a family, Maira had a happy life that she was in control of. The only weight on her shoulders were the needs of her husband and children, not the fate of an entire galaxy full of killer cyborgs and shadowy Sith plots. *Maybe coming home was a mistake,* Esera thought. *I'm just getting tormented by the normal life I could have had, and will never have. Maybe it'd have been better if I'd never come here. Maybe it'd have been better if they'd thought I was safely tucked away in the Temple, and not one of the monsters they've only heard stories of...*

The next morning, over breakfast, Esera announced her decision. While they said they were sad to see her leave so soon, neither brother nor sister made an attempt to convince her to stay. *I don't belong here,* Esera thought. *Not now, maybe not ever. My place is out there.*

As she packed, none other than Grievous himself contacted her. Esera sighed, and answered. The cyborg's life-size hologram sprang out of her communicator. "Komara!" he barked.

"Oh great, it's you," said Esera. "What do you want?"

"I'm making sure you're not dead," Grievous said, arms clasped behind his back. "You tend to get beaten by warriors much more powerful than you, when I leave you alone."

"I'm really not in the mood for it, Grievous," Esera told him. She turned to face him, her back to the bedroom door.

"Taunting you is so easy," said Grievous, the skin around his eyes crinkling as if he were smiling. "I need you to go to Zeltros."

"Zeltros? Why?" Zeltros was the party planet, Esera had heard. It had no military value.

"Because it's the next major planet after Umbara, on that hyperlane," Grievous said. "My other agents there have not met with success. You are to go there and secure their allegiance, or neutrality."

"What makes you think they'll cooperate with me?" asked Esera.

"You are persuasive. And to persuade them, tell them I may have to burn their planet to ash, if they stay with the Republic."

"Why? We have Umbara, we don't need Zeltros too!"

"When Khagan Yaziir united Kalee, he razed every city that fought him. The rest submitted without a drop of blood spilled," Grievous said.

"This isn't Kalee! The rest of us aren't bloodthirsty barbarians!" Esera was only a decibel short of yelling at the horrible cyborg. "You don't get to go around killing whoever you want!"

"Who would stop me? You?" Grievous tilted his head, looking as smug as a faceless man could.

"Don't look so sure, clanker-in-chief!" Resorting to a clone trooper moniker surprised Esera almost as much as it surprised Grievous. "Master Vos had you dead to rights, Khan told me so. If going dark side is what stops you from murdering millions, I'll do it."

"You couldn't beat me with three arms tied behind my back."

Esera's blood was running hot now. She was having a bad time already, this was just fuel on the fire. "I am so tired of people like you! I'm sick of your attitude, I'm sick of how you think the only truth in the universe is power! You say you hate the Jedi so much, but you're just as bad as they are! You're blinded by your own arrogance, just like them! Each and every one of us is a murderer, you're as guilty as everyone else!"

"How dare you-" Grievous began, his hologram rising to his full height.

"Shut up!" yelled Esera, glaring up at him. "I'll go to Zeltros, and I'll do what I can to get them out of the way. But if you think for a single moment I'm going to let you start acting like Ardabur Aspar did at Shumavar, you should know I'll do to you what I did to him! So you better watch it, Grievous!" Esera shut off the communicator, her heart racing and her breathing heavy.

Wonderful, he's going to be cranky next time we- At that moment, Esera noticed three presences in the Force, directly behind her. She turned, and saw Maira, Toren, and Harin peeking around the door frame. Maira looked horrified, Harin was pale and wide-eyed. But Toren had a smug smile on his face.

"Not even the Jedi could erase a Komara woman's temper," he said.

"You better believe it," Esera muttered, returning to packing the dresses Maira had given her.

I need to be careful, she thought, *Jedi and anger aren't supposed to mix. And now that I think about it, I have been... running hotter, lately. Is this who I am without my Jedi training?* That idea occupied her mind for the rest of the morning, until it was time to leave. Maira kissed her goodbye, and Esera hugged the kids, and she even got a very slight half-nod of acknowledgment from Harin. Toren was the one who took her back to the spaceport.

"Finally, we're away from Maira," he said, once they were on the train. It was midday, most people were at work or school, so they had the car nearly to themselves. "If there's anything you want to talk about that you couldn't around her, now's the time."

"She's probably relieved I'm gone, isn't she?" asked Esera, in a gloomy mood.

"No," Toren said. "Not at all. She had this silly little fantasy that you were home for good and you just needed time to adjust. She even talked about pointing you in the direction of a suitable husband!" His mouth twisted upwards in a half-smile, before it faded away. "You don't know what it did to her, to lose everyone but me before she was ten. Having you come back out of nowhere, well, that was a miracle as far as she knew. If our little sister could return, then anything was possible, as far as Maira was concerned. I knew it wasn't happening though, from the very first night. You've been at war since you were fourteen, Esera. And by what Maira told me, I don't think even you know how much that's effected you."

"Sometimes I get moments of clarity," Esera said. "I had a lot of them here, actually."

"Unlike our sister, I'm not going to pretend everything's okay. You've got a lot to work out, things neither of us can help you with," said Toren. "I'm just a teacher, I terrorize children with literary analysis and proper grammar. I can't even imagine how to handle living with what you've seen and done."

"I don't expect you to," said Esera. "I am grateful for everything, but... the difference between the life I've lived, and the life you've lived, it's..."

"As vast as the sea," said Toren, putting his hands over hers. "You're not ready for life on Stalimur, Esera. Not yet. Your place is still out there, and if there's anyone who can help you, they're out there too. It's not us. I wish it were, but it isn't. You do what you have to do to figure things out for yourself. Just remember, when you're out there, far off on some distant world: this is your home. Home will always call you back, and we'll be here for you when that day comes."

But as Esera's master had been fond of saying, *you can't go home again*. He'd always said it wistfully, but there was nothing wistful about what Esera felt now. *I understand what you meant, master,* Esera thought. An unhappy brooding settled in her heart, as she returned to the only life she'd ever known.

Author's paragraphs: I hope you enjoyed your beverages, reader, because that was 17.2K words. Timewatch's infamous long-windedness has never been more apparent. But most of you seem to like that, so should I even apologize? There were several factors at work here. This was 5 months of writing stitched together into something like a coherent narrative. It couldn't be helped, it's been a hectic year, with babby's first travel to the Old World and mismanaged pandemics... Secondly, this is the first chapter that's a product of the narrative shift ASD has undergone. 2019 was a very big year in the development of this story, I figured out just where I wanted to go with it. That required a pit stop at Stalimur for Esera, whose overall character arc came into crystal-clear focus (for me) last year, as well as having to add Shaak Ti as a point of view character, as all my prior attempts to insert her into the story were so contrived I deleted them. Grievous is hardly seen in this chapter, but I hope his presence was felt throughout. It's about him as much as it is about anyone else. Don't call this filler, either, everything established here matters. Even the marriage habits of Stalimurians, Timewatch? Yes, reader, even that. Shout-out to Robert Jordan by the way, Stalimur is more than a little inspired by Two Rivers in his Wheel of Time series. You know, the subtle matriarchy, the clearly-defined gender roles, women thinking its weird for other women to wear pants...

So, there you have it, our longest chapter yet, and the most action was a rocket blowing up some building. Sure learned a lot about our central characters, though! And to toot my own horn, that's more than I can say about the last season of The Clone Wars... who exactly is Ahsoka Tano again? Did we ever learn anything about her besides she does "the right thing" and "fights for the Republic?" Oh well, I'll fix her too in this story. If you wanted action, just wait for the next arc, guys, it's pretty obvious where we're going next and who will be there. God willing chapter 31 will come in early June.

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